

## Inaugural Address

*Ronald D. Liebowitz delivered the following in inaugural address on October 10, 2004.*

Thank you for all those warm greetings.

There are three special guests here today, three former presidents of the College, whose presence I would like to acknowledge. These men led Middlebury for a combined 40 years, and all of them played major roles in bringing Middlebury into the constellation of the nation's finest liberal arts colleges. Each has left his mark on the institution, building upon the successes of predecessors, and all of us associated with the College are proud and most appreciative of their contributions. Would each of you stand and let us recognize you for all your contributions: James Armstrong, Olin Robison, and John McCardell. Thank you for being here.

Chairman of the Board of Trustees Rick Fritz, Members of the Board, Governor Douglas, former Presidents Armstrong, Robison, and McCardell, Dr. Stameshkin, faculty and administrative colleagues, staff colleagues, Middlebury students and alumni, residents of the town of Middlebury, representatives of the academy, friends, and family—I thank you for your presence on this important day in the life of Middlebury College.

I want also to thank the Presidential Search Committee for its hard work. I recognize and appreciate the challenging task it faced, and I assume this presidency today understanding the confidence the Committee exhibited in recommending my candidacy to the Board of Trustees.

I also thank the Trustees for acting upon that confidence, and for the invaluable guidance and support many members of the Board lent to me during my time in the administration prior to this year.

Special thanks, too, to the Inauguration Committee for conceiving of, coordinating, and executing this multi-faceted celebration amid one of the busiest weeks on campus in memory ... and to our facilities, buildings and grounds, and dining staffs, all of whom prepared the campus so magnificently for the arrival of so many visitors, and brought back to life this historic quadrangle for campus-wide ceremonies.

I extend thanks to my administrative colleagues with whom I have worked, both past and present, for helping me to prepare for this day. One does not jump from faculty member to senior college administrator without a few lessons in between. I have been fortunate to have had a number of wise mentors along the way whose patience helped to make the transition far smoother than it would have been.

I am also delighted to have present today many members of my extended family. I thank them for being here.

And finally, thanks most of all to my wife Jessica, who everyday brings wisdom, perspective, and love to our life together. We enter this challenge together, as partners, and I feel blessed that she is here beside me.

Today, of course, is the 16th inauguration of a Middlebury president. As College historian David Stameshkin has noted in his two-volume history of Middlebury College and in his comments today, the College was a long shot to succeed—it was founded as an "experiment" in what was then a tiny settlement, with no government support, and had to compete with the recently founded University of Vermont for the limited number of students in the northern reaches of New England.

Yet, after the College was able to establish some semblance of permanency, thanks to the support of the town and the bold decision to admit women in 1883, which expanded the pool of eligible students to attend Middlebury, there is one constant that shaped and continues to shape, directly and indirectly, the institution's identity, its development, and the important position it holds within higher education. And that constant is "place."

By "place," I mean, as geographers do, the physical as well as the human characteristics of a location or territory that influence the region's cultural development in one particular way or another.

Middlebury's history is linked strongly to its physical setting. I want to point to a few examples of how this particular region of Vermont has shaped the College's development, and then speak to the relevance to us today of the relationship between the region's natural assets and the human creativity and ingenuity it has inspired over the years.

Let's take, for example, the founding of the College's world-renowned intensive summer Language Schools. It was a train ride through here, through the Champlain Valley, taken by Vassar College German Professor Lilian Stroebe, which led to the founding of the first of what are now nine intensive summer foreign Language Schools.

The remoteness of the by-then-well-established College, seen from Lilian Stroebe's train window, would provide the combination of infrastructure and isolation necessary for students to become fully immersed in German language and culture with limited distraction. Students would eat and reside in College residence halls with their faculty, and they would participate, literally around the clock, in a German environment, with classes supplemented by lectures, musical, and other cultural events, intended to enmesh students in German language and culture. Short of going to Germany, the Middlebury campus in 1915, unused in the summer months and largely isolated from even the nearby town, seemed to Stroebe the perfect place for such a learning environment.

The Middlebury administration, led by President John Thomas, immediately saw the virtues of the idea, and granted Professor Stroebe the right to begin the German School the very next summer. Within a few years, Middlebury established an intensive French School and

then a Spanish School. Russian and Italian followed, after which came Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and, most recently, Portuguese.

The success of the intensive Language Schools, in turn, established Middlebury, remote as it was, as a magnet for a remarkably rich international curriculum, as some of the most prominent intellectuals visited the summer language programs, some of them to escape the totalitarian regimes of the last century. Thus, the College's remote location, with its perfect environment for full immersion in a foreign language and culture, sowed the seeds for the College's internationalized curriculum, first through its rich array of courses in the graduate summer language programs, and later in its undergraduate liberal arts program.

Based on the early success of the intensive foreign Language Schools, the College established another summer program, the Bread Loaf School of English, on Bread Loaf mountain, in Ripton, Vermont, 12 miles from Middlebury. The School of English began operations in 1920. The School's first dean, Wilfred Davison, recruited a nationally-known faculty, but as consequential as hiring the superb academic faculty was his decision to supplement the standard English literature curriculum with visits and readings by the best living writers of the day, who were drawn to the beauty and remoteness of this special place as an ideal environment for contemplation and creativity.

The popularity of the guest appearances at the Bread Loaf School of English led, five years later, to the establishment of the Writers' Conference—the country's first formal gathering of professional writers and editors with the sole purpose of teaching talented, aspiring writers. And thus was born the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, which will celebrate its 80th session this coming summer. Included on its honor roll of faculty and attendees are: Robert Frost, Willa Cather, Archibald MacLeish, Wallace Stegner, Isaac Asimov, Joan Didion, John Gardner, John Irving, Edward Hirsch, and Toni Morrison.

A final example I will use to underscore the importance of "place" to the College's development and identity is the match between the extraordinary natural endowments of this region and the establishment of the country's first undergraduate environmental studies major in 1965. Five Middlebury faculty—Doc Woodin, Brew Baldwin, Rowland Illick, D.K. Smith, and Louie Pool—from five different disciplines—biology, geology, geography, economics, and chemistry—worked collaboratively to establish this innovative interdisciplinary program before the environmental movement hit college campuses, and before interdisciplinary study was fashionable. They viewed the relative pristine condition of the region's natural environment, seen most visibly in the nearby forests still untouched by human activity, as an outstanding laboratory for student and faculty research. They also saw the threats to that environment, which became their motivation to offer Middlebury students a more focused way to engage in the study of our natural surroundings.

The decades-long tradition of rigorous study of environmental issues, especially, at first, in geology and biology, influenced the development of the College's programs in the natural sciences. Our natural science departments have emerged as one of Middlebury's hidden curricular strengths. They are comprehensive in scope, and offer our students an impressive array of opportunities for research and collaboration directly with faculty, both in the field and in the laboratory. When the story of the dynamism of the College's natural science programs gets out, the study of the natural sciences will also come to serve as a distinguishing characteristic of this College, rooted, however indirectly, in its particular "place."

So what do we learn about Middlebury College from these three stories? Perhaps, most obviously, it is that place is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to explain Middlebury's particular tradition of excellence. In fact, the most enduring and renowned programs at the College have resulted from exceptional human ingenuity and creativity.

Many passengers rode the same train that Lilian Stroebe rode before she pursued her idea for the German School. But it was Professor Stroebe's imagination that ultimately led to the establishment of the full-immersion approach to foreign language study.

Similarly, it was the vision and persuasiveness of two Middlebury College English professors, Edward Day Collins and Wilfred Davison, that convinced President Thomas to experiment with a School of English, rather than sell the Bread Loaf Inn, as it planned to do, not long after the College acquired it in a bequest. That experiment led to what is now the largest graduate English literature program in the country, as well as the first and still premier national Writers' Conference, emulated many times over around the country.

Any college in a beautiful and isolated place might have offered the first environmental studies major. But it was the collaborative commitment of those five Middlebury College professors that helped break new ground by establishing an interdisciplinary major at a time when crossing disciplinary boundaries was largely theoretical at the college level. The program today includes 45 faculty members from 22 academic departments, graduates, on average, 45 students a year, and is generally recognized as the model undergraduate environmental studies program in the country.

A less obvious lesson that emerges from the three stories about Middlebury College is that each of the exceptional programs described here was based on the assumption that intensive human interaction is essential for learning. The full "immersion" approach to teaching a foreign language and culture, which the remoteness of the place inspired, placed students and faculty, side by side, in classrooms, in the dining room, and in the residence halls, isolated from outside influences, and engaged in an intense learning environment. Based on my own experience of studying two summers at the College's Russian School, I can vouch for the significance of the intense and relentless faculty focus on student learning; it was like no other learning experience I have ever had.

The essence of Bread Loaf's success is quite similar. Rather than learn from the nation's best literary scholars and writers by solely reading their works, students at the School of English and Writers' Conference are constantly engaged with them, face-to-face, in classes, lectures, and readings.

The success of the environmental studies program—indeed of any interdisciplinary program—springs from the same source: faculty reaching directly into the student's learning process. Instead of leaving students to their own devices for figuring out how to assemble a plan of study from a set of discrete courses, these faculty members bent and redrew disciplinary boundaries to create a more coherent and integrated way to study the environment. Such an approach to teaching and learning requires greater time commitments on the part of the faculty member, but the rewards have been clear to Middlebury faculty and students for many generations.

So, what is our charge today as we witness the inauguration of a new administration for Middlebury College, and take stock of the

College's history and culture? I would say our charge is twofold: to be true to that impressive history, we must, first, preserve those parts of the Middlebury culture that encourage creativity and foster innovation. To do this, there must be a level of confidence within the institution so that particular successes in one area of the College are viewed as successes across the entire institution—a genuine feeling that all parts of the College community benefit from exceptional work and achievement; otherwise successes born out of innovation and creativity will have little chance of survival.

To be true to Middlebury's history and culture, we must also commit ourselves to being very clear about what we do here, and why we've been doing it so well for more than two centuries. What we do best is give students the opportunity to work directly with faculty—dedicated teachers who have mastered specific bodies of knowledge, who are mentors and motivators, and who see their role as participating in a four-year process of opening the hearts and minds of their students and preparing them for a lifetime of learning.

Faculty and students by themselves, however, can't be expected to uphold this tradition of students working so closely with faculty. Understandably, faculty have many competing pressures for their time. And students, by definition, require guidance for making the most of their education while at Middlebury. So it is the staff, in all of its diversity of interest and expertise, who need to play a critical role of keeping the institution focused on the centrality of intensive student-faculty interaction.

I am confident that: by developing a culture in which everyone understands how his or her own particular role contributes directly to the College's core mission of educating young men and women through direct and rigorous engagement with faculty, and, at the same time, by developing a culture in which a particular achievement is viewed across the College as an institutional achievement, where one department's success is viewed with pride by other departments, we will ensure that this College continues to foster and encourage the Lilian Stroebe's of the future.

In doing so, we will be fulfilling our charge—preserving and nurturing the proud traditions we inherit here at Middlebury College.

Thank you.

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